

Evangelical Review of Theology

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Volume 30 · Number 4 · October 2006

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

On Prayer and Forgiveness

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KEYWORDS: *Presence, words, love, attention, Spirit, flesh, sonship, sin, righteousness, Lord's Prayer*

We get our idea of prayer, not from the Gospels, but from our parents and other adult members of our culture and language community. That idea of prayer centres on words. As children we are told to say our prayers. The pastor says, 'let us pray' and words follow. We come to think that prayer is all about words. I was at a prayer meeting one day and when we began to pray there was a short silence. Before a minute had passed one of the men blurted out, 'If we're not going to pray, I have better things to do.' Our culture has led us to believe that prayer is about words, but Jesus says that it is not about words. He says,

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him (Matt. 6:7-8 (NRSV)).

Paul also reinforces this idea that prayer is not about words when he says, 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thess. 5:17). It seems obvious that Paul does not expect us to be constantly mumbling words. Augustine says something very similar.

When we pray there is no need of speech, that is of articulate words, except perhaps as priests use words to give a sign of what is in their minds, not that God may hear, but that men may hear and, being put in remembrance, may with some consent be brought into dependence on God.¹

So sometimes prayer may involve words but it is not essentially about words. Augustine makes the point that the words we use in prayer are not for God who knows our hearts and is not in need of the mediacy of words.

Mother Teresa was once asked

1 Augustine, *De Magistro* 1.2, in *The Library of Christian Classics*. Vol VI. *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1958), p. 70.

what she said when she prayed? She responded by saying, that she did not say anything, she listened. She was then asked what God said when she listened? She said, 'he doesn't say anything, he listens.' God listening to us listen to him. What a beautiful picture of prayer. It is like two lovers who simply return a gaze without saying a word. This is the communion that is prayer. It is openness before God. As such, some people never pray in spite of their mumbling words that we call prayers. Other people have lives that are prayers. Jesus' life was certainly a prayer in that he was constantly open to God. As his disciples, our lives should be prayers as well, but how do we achieve such a state of prayer?

On Being Present

One thing that is essential in order for us to be open before God is that we be present. Being present means that we are here and nowhere else. In order to truly communicate with any person, divine or human, we must be present to that other person. Intimate communication with another person requires that our attention must be focused on that other person. The Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), went so far as to claim that love itself was essentially a matter of attention abnormally fixed: 'Falling in love, initially, is no more than this: attention abnormally fastened upon another person.'²

His claim was that within the consciousness of 'the lover his beloved... possesses a constant presence'.³ This certainly seems true of the love that exists between people who are romantically *in love*, but I think it is also descriptive of other forms of love as well. In fact, it seems to be what is at the base of all true affection and what we most desire in our relationships. The affection children desire from their parents largely involves attention, in the same way that the affection we desire in a romantic relationship largely involves attention. Even friendships, if they are to be meaningful, require that we are capable of fixing our attention upon our friend, and if someone we consider a friend is unwilling to give us their attention, we feel we may have been mistaken in considering them a friend in the first place. This is also true in regard to our love relationship with God. Our attention is what God most desires from us.

Unfortunately, the ability of most human beings to really give their attention and be truly present to anyone, including God, is very limited. Because of this, we are a constant disappointment to our spouses, children, and friends. My wife's disappointment in me, as a lover, usually involves my lack of attention. 'You're not here' is her complaint. And although I try to assure her that I was listening and can even repeat what she said, her complaint is still true. I may have been listening, but I was not attentive. My wife knows that to be truly loved is a matter of attention, and she is frustrated by my

2 Jose Ortega y Gasset, *On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme* (Trans. Toby Talbot; New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1957), p. 64.

3 Gasset, *On Love*, p. 65.

lack of attention. Small children seem instinctively to know the same thing and evidence it by clamouring to their mothers, 'Watch me!'

It is certainly difficult to be attentive and present in today's world. One reason for that is that in today's world, if we are to be successful, we have to plan. We have to be focused upon the future rather than the here and now. The further we climb the ladder of success, the more we need to plan and be looking to the next thing we have to do. Because of this, successful people are seldom truly present and end up living in the future. Their attention is always somewhere else and seldom here and now. For this reason many successful people are not very good at relationships, since real relationships, whether they be with God or other human beings, require that we be present to that other person. When people are constantly planning the next thing they have to do, it is very difficult for them to be present enough to have truly intimate relationships.

By contrast, there are other people who are seldom present because they live in the past. They have difficulty being present because of something, either good or bad, in the past that possesses their attention and keeps them from being present. In order to pray and be open to God, we must be present and escape the pull of both past and future.

Being in the Spirit

The other necessary condition for prayer, or true openness before God, is to be 'in the spirit' and not 'in the flesh'. Jesus, like Paul, uses the metaphor *flesh and spirit*. We might

immediately assume that in those instances where *flesh* is contrasted with *spirit* it is a metaphor for the physical body in contrast to the immaterial mind or spirit. It is easy to make such an assumption since our western culture has a long tradition of distinguishing mind from body and elevating mind or spirit while demeaning the physical body. But what Paul identifies as the works of the flesh include things like: idolatry, hatred, wrath, strife, sedition, and envy.⁴ These are not works done by the body.

The New International Version of the Bible translates flesh (σάρξ) as 'sinful nature'. Of course, that is as much a metaphor as 'flesh', so what is this flesh or sinful nature? The one thing it is not is that which causes God to turn away from us. Jesus quite clearly tells us, in too many places to mention, that it is not God who turns away from us but we who turn away from God. In the parable of the banquet,⁵ it is not the fact of being uninvited that keeps people from the banquet but the fact that they had better places to be. More than anything else, this seems to be our sinful nature. It is the fact that we would rather find life and meaning apart from God and all that he has for us. As such, the flesh is the self that we create rather than the self that God has created.

This does not mean that the flesh and spirit are two different selves. The spirit is simply a deeper self. It is who we are at the core of our being. By con-

⁴ Gal. 5:19-20.

⁵ Matt. 22:2-5.

trast, the flesh is the outer self that we create as we identify with those things that become our source of meaning and purpose rather than God. The flesh is what develops when we begin to find life and meaning in the very things of which Jesus warns us of in the Sermon on the Mount.

This is our real sin and what separates us from God. It is that we spend trivial existences with our attention focused upon all of the little gods of this world. Our real sin is that instead being who Jesus tells us we are, we create our own identity by attaching ourselves to the things of this world and attempting to draw life and meaning from them. Jesus repeatedly tells us that God is our (your) father and we are his beloved daughters and sons,⁶ but we ignore that identity and instead attempt to create an identity for ourselves apart from God.

The things of which Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount are the very things from which we create such an identity. They are the things from which we attempt to draw energy and life—the things from which we derive meaning and purpose for our lives. For many of us, what provides energy and vitality is the anger and lust that Jesus warns us against and tells us are as deadly as murder and adultery.⁷ Equally, our oaths, our sense of justice, and even our enemies⁸ provide many with purpose and motivation that fuels

their lives rather than God.

Perhaps even more sinister are our good works and religious activities,⁹ which may look pious, but, when they rather than God are our source of identity, they are the very things that separate us from God. Many think that they will find identity and happiness in earthly treasure,¹⁰ while others become possessed by worry and it is worry that occupies all of their thoughts rather than God.¹¹ These are the things that identify us and make us who we are in other people's eyes, and most often our own eyes as well. They are, however, the very things that separate us from God and our true identity.

In God's eyes, we are his beloved daughters and sons. He does not love us because of the greatness of our charitable or pious works,¹² nor does he love our ability to keep our oaths.¹³ These may be the reasons other people love us, but God is not like other people. As a matter of fact, the things for which other people love us are often the very things that keep us from God. They keep us from God because they capture our attention and cause us to focus on them to such an extent that we become oblivious to God's presence in our lives. As we form an identity in the flesh by finding the source of our energy and life in the things of which Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount, we lose sight of who we are at the very core of our being. Our atten-

6 Matt. 5:16; 5:45; 6:1; 6:8-9; 6:15; 7:1; 10:20; 10:29; 18:14; 23:9; Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:36; 12:30; John 20:17.

7 Matt. 5:21-30.

8 Matt. 5:33-48.

9 Matt. 6:1-18.

10 Matt. 6:19-24.

11 Matt. 6:25-34.

12 Matt. 6:1-4.

13 Matt. 5:33-37.

tion becomes fixed upon those things that give rise to the flesh, and thus we no longer live out the ultimate reality of who we are as God's beloved children. This is our real sin, it is the fact that we have assumed a false identity.

In order to get to a place of prayer, we have to assume our true identity rather than the one we have created for ourselves. We need to see ourselves as God sees us. This is what it means to be in the spirit rather than the flesh. To be 'in the *spirit*' is to be at the core of our being. This is our real self, the self that will live on after the flesh is long dead and forgotten. This is the self that is loved by God. Before we did anything right or wrong we were his creation, and he loved us because we were his.

We discover this true identity by living as Jesus lived. The way Jesus lived was with God in all of his thoughts. He did not identify with, nor allow himself to be occupied by, those things that he warns us of in the Sermon on the Mount. Instead he lived a life in a constant awareness that he was God's beloved son. He tells us to follow him and live in that same sonship. This is who we are at the core of our being. This is who we are in our spirit, and it is out of this core of our being that God wishes us to live.

Sin and righteousness are essentially matters of belonging. Do we belong to God or the things of this world? Our natural tendency is to take our identity from the world. Kingdom living occurs when we repent, and turn from those things that create the illusion that is the false self, and instead found our identity upon who we are in God. This is what it means to live in the spirit rather than the flesh. It is also what it means to live a life of prayer.

Jesus gives us instruction on how to pray or be present to God from the core of our being. He says, when you pray, 'go into your room and shut the door' (Matt. 6:6 NRSV). Of course, 'go into your room and shut the door' is a metaphor that could imply several things. The one thing it implies is that when we pray, we should not be seen by others. The most important reason for not being seen by others is because when we first learn to pray it is extremely difficult in the presence of others. When we are in the presence of others we are almost always 'in the flesh' and seldom who we really are at the core of our being. Augustine, in commenting about this teaching of Jesus, says that what this metaphor of going into our room and shutting the door means is that we are to go into the innermost part of our being.

We have been commanded to pray in closed chambers, by which is meant our inmost mind, for no other reason than that God does not seek to be reminded or taught by our speech in order that he may give us what we desire. He who speaks gives by articulate sounds an external sign of what he wants. But God is to be sought and prayed to in the secret place... which is called 'the inner man.' This he wants to be his temple.¹⁴

In my room, or the King James Version says 'closet', I have the best chance to find that inner man of which Augustine speaks. In my closet I have the best chance to be in my spirit rather than my flesh because in my closet

14 Augustine, p. 70.

there is no one with whom I am angry or no one after whom I lust. My enemies are not there and my good works and religious activities no longer identify me. In my closet, my earthly treasure does not establish my worth, and I have the opportunity to assume my true identity as who Jesus says I am. That is, that God is my father and I am his son. This is my true identity, and it is the place of prayer—the place from which I can be present to God from the core of my being.

The Purpose of Prayer

From this place of prayer, we get a strange assurance that all will be well no matter what problems face us. From this place of prayer, God communicates to us that he is listening, and he does so, as Mother Teresa tells us, without using words. But as wonderful as such things are, they are not the ultimate purpose of prayer. The ultimate purpose of prayer is that it is only from such a place that our capacity for forgiveness increases.

In Jesus' teaching on prayer from the Sermon on the Mount, after the verses that have come to be known as the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says,

If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matt. 6:14-15 NRSV).

The Lord's Prayer conveniently ends with the 13th verse and does not include the above quoted verses 14 and 15. We like to think that the Christian life is about God blessing us, and blessing us because of something good

about us. But God loves us because of his goodness and not ours. We enter heaven because of forgiveness and not goodness.

Of course, if we are not forgiving of others, we will not wish to spend eternity with a forgiving God. If we do not want to spend eternity with people who we had good reason to hate, heaven will not be very heavenly. We may like to think that people we hate are not going to be in heaven. We believe that in heaven there will only be good people like us. To believe that, however, is to not understand the nature of the God that Jesus reveals.

The God of the Gospels is all about forgiveness. We all come to God because we have been forgiven, but we will not want to share eternity with others whom God has forgiven if we have not forgiven them. Even if God did permit us to enter heaven with unforgiveness, it would not be very heavenly once we discover that there are other sinners there that God has forgiven but we have not. Without forgiveness, we want separation from such people. Separation from such people, however, requires separation from God as well.

However, most of us have a different picture of heaven. We imagine that Heaven will be a place where all of our desires will be fulfilled. But God is not interested in satisfying our desires. His interest is to transform us and make us into the likeness of his Son—which, of course, is in our ultimate interest as well. Being like Jesus, however, is not about being sinless. In fact, the good religious people of Jesus' day saw Jesus as a sinner. He seemed to deliberately break the Jewish law, which they held as God-given. Likewise, he did not abstain from drinking and asso-

ciating with disreputable people. Overall, he did not appear to be interested in creating an image of sinlessness, in spite of all our efforts to make him into our idea of a religious figure. Instead, Jesus manifests the holiness of God through his ability to forgive the very ones who tortured and put him to death. Furthermore, he calls us to follow him in that forgiveness. Thus, wanting to be like Jesus is first and foremost a desire to be forgiving as Jesus was forgiving. This is what it means to be holy as he was holy.

Of course, our capacity for such forgiveness is very limited. The *cliché*, 'to err is human, to forgive divine' may not be a *cliché* at all. When we are offended, we desire the offending party to pay for the offence. The idea of suffering an offence for the sake of restoring relationship with the person who offended us is certainly unappealing. If the offence is serious enough, we do not desire restoration at all, especially since we will have to suffer something in order to accomplish that restoration. That, however, is what forgiveness is, and it is the revelation of the divine that Jesus offers from the cross.

I remember a story about a woman who had been raped and her entire family killed by a gang of soldiers. Years later, while working as a nurse, a soldier was brought to her hospital on the brink of death. The nurse recognized him as the officer in charge of the men who raped her and killed her family. After eight days, the woman nursed the man back to health. Upon regaining consciousness, he was told that the only reason he was alive was because of the loving care of this nurse. Upon recognizing her, he asked why she would do such a thing? She replied by

telling him that she followed one who said, 'love your enemies'.¹⁵

Now in spite of how grand her act of love and forgiveness seems, it does not approach the love and forgiveness of God. Indeed, in order for it to replicate God's love and forgiveness, the nurse would have to be willing to marry the soldier and take him as her beloved just as Jesus from the cross asks his Father to forgive his torturers so they might share eternity with him.

We marvel at such forgiveness in Jesus or anyone else who can replicate it in whatever small measure; but although we admire such forgiveness in others, it is not something we wish for ourselves. We much prefer to follow Jesus by being good rather than forgiving. Indeed, the idea of the innocent paying for the guilty, for the sake of restoration, is not only unappealing but it may be something that is impossible and out of our reach.

Given our all-too-human nature, true forgiveness of anything more than trivial offences may be beyond what is possible. Our nature is certainly limited in regard to forgiveness, but as limited as it may be, our capacity for forgiveness does increase with prayer. That is because true prayer, like true forgiveness, is not a work of the flesh. Indeed, it is not a work at all but rather a letting go. Furthermore, the thing we let go of in both prayer and forgiveness is the flesh itself. The flesh is what holds most of our hurts and it is what must be let go of with forgiveness. Of course, the more substantial the flesh, and the more we live exclusively in the

15 Matt. 5:44.

flesh, the more impossible it is to let go of that which seems to be the totality of who we are.

I recently heard a very famous person say that one of his life principles was to always get even. Do not let any offence go unpunished. If we live exclusively in the flesh that certainly makes sense. If our identity is founded exclusively upon our sense of justice¹⁶ and our earthly treasure,¹⁷ or our good name and reputation,¹⁸ any threat to such things are threats to our very being and the threat must be destroyed. If we are able, however, to get to that deeper self—that self that we are before God—the offence against our flesh has little meaning because our flesh has little meaning.

This is one of the reasons that Jesus tells us that we must be like little children.¹⁹ We must return to that core of our being—that core of who we were before we created for ourselves that flesh that we hold so dear.

We must realize that there are some wounds that need to be forgiven that are not flesh wounds. Some wounds are deep wounds that have damaged the core of our being. Things like childhood sexual abuse or other childhood traumas may have occurred before we

had the chance to develop a flesh. Such deep wounds may require more in the way of forgiveness than simply letting go of the flesh. Even in such cases, however, the solution is a forgiveness that requires that we return to the core of our being. Indeed, very often the person who has received a wound to the core of their being has a very well developed flesh since they wish to be protected from any future deep wounds. But deep wounds, like flesh wounds, still require forgiveness, and forgiveness requires the kind of return to our core that is found in prayer. The kind of forgiveness that is so essential to the Christian life can be accomplished only when we are present to God from the core of our being—when we are in a place of prayer.

If we are to be like Jesus and forgive as he forgave, we must live a life of prayer—a life of being present to God from the core of our being. It is only from the security of who we are in God at the core of our being that we can experience the letting go that is so essential to real forgiveness. As long as we are in the flesh, the best we can do is to make a pretence of forgiveness. Forgiveness in the flesh is simply a work of the flesh. It puffs up and makes us into religious people with more reason to be proud of our flesh. Real forgiveness comes only when we are in God's presence and at the core of our being—real forgiveness takes place only in that deep place of prayer.

16 Matt. 5:38-42.

17 Matt. 6:19-21.

18 Matt. 6:1-4.

19 Matt. 18:3.